

The Tradition of Non-classical Dance Practices in Maharashtra

ASHOKJI PARANJAPE

When we think of the art and culture of any area, we must take into consideration the geographical status of the land and the different historical influences.

The geography of a region exerts a great influence on the rains and temperature which in turn influence the costumes, presentation and occasions for presentation of the region's performing arts. The invasions from outside also influence art forms. Maharashtra was invaded by the Shakas, Hunas and Mughals who brought in chaos and upheavals. It also experienced benevolent rule by Vijayanagara, Kadamba and the local Maratha rulers who encouraged the local artistic traditions which included dances which were, by and large, non-classical but enjoyed long-established traditions.

Maharashtra consists of a vast plateau and a narrow strip of coastal lowland which is the northern tip of the Western Ghats. The Sahyadri mountain range touches the Satpura range at the northern area of the State, eventually descending towards the Deccan plateau.

For the present study this area, which is popularly called the Deccan, becomes the focal point. As is the case all over the world, the culture that is called Marathi culture flourished in this region along the banks of the rivers Godavari, Tapi, Bhima and Krishna. South of the Tapi, in what is called the Marathwada region, are the world-renowned Ellora and Ajanta caves abounding in sculptural and painted representations of dancing. These depictions, especially those found in the Buddhist caves, are considered to be some of the earliest in the country.

The racial of tribal strains found in this area are many but the relevant ones for this study are those which are found also in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Karnataka. While considering the dance tradition of Maharashtra, it thus becomes necessary to take in the influence of these three States on Maharashtra, specially its dance tradition.

Accordingly the *Gof nṛtya* of Maharashtra, which is prevalent in Khandesh, shows the clear influence of the *rās* of Gujarat. The *vāghyā-muralī* dance and the dance of the *jogtins* have a linkage with similar

performances from the adjoining regions of Karnataka. The *vāghyāmuralī* is traditionally associated with the temple of Lord Khandoba at Jejuri in Maharashtra; the place of its origin is Mangsali in Karnataka. The famous *tamāshā* dances show a very strong influence of Kathak. These traditional dances continued to be practised against heavy odds like foreign invasions and social distaste. Most of these arts—which can be termed as folk arts—are by and large hereditary in nature and are handed down from generation to generation.

Let us consider some of the well-known traditions, more in the light of the practitioners.

Muralīs: *Muralīs* are the dancing girls who have contributed to the tradition of non-classical dance practices of Maharashtra. They are devotees of Lord Khandoba and are always accompanied by the male co-artistes called *vāghyās*. In comparison to the *muralīs* the male dancers have a controlled way of dancing and few steps. The dancing of the *muralīs* has a definite pattern.

Previously these girls were offered in marriage to Lord Khandoba. Khandoba is worshipped in Maharashtra by almost all communities. The worshipper used to take a vow before the Lord that if he had a child, he would offer it to the Lord. If a child happened to be a girl, she was called *muralī*. These girls take part in the ritual dance-drama called *Jagaraṇ* where they offer their prayers through dances. Usually *muralīs* are clad in a nine-yard sari and wear a blouse of nine pieces. They have dual *ghatis* (small bells) in their right hand which holds the end of their saris and with the left hand they make *hastas*. Most of these *hastas* denote auspicious things. Their footwork is remarkable and they do *baiṭhak* (sitting) in the *drut laya*. There are no *ghunghroos* tied to the feet. This dance is entirely a ritual dance. Socially these girls cannot be called *varyośitās* (prostitutes) because they are attached only to one man and do not earn their living by prostitution. Their status in the society is a special one. Though they are not housewives, they do observe day-to-day rules of household. These *muralīs* by their dance have given inspiration to other dancing schools like *tamāshā* and *kalāvantins*.

Due to rapid industrialization and technological advance the rural society all over the country is changing and has become more fast-paced. Social activists have taken up causes like the eradication of the dowry system, etc; they have also lodged a campaign to eliminate the ritual marriage of girls to Lord Khandoba. Despite these changes the dance of the *muralīs* has been kept alive, albeit in diminished numbers, by the older performers like Shrimati Manikbai Renke of Pune and Shrimati Satpute of Jejuri. The

baithaks, hastas and *bhramaris* are even today retained in their dances with grace, dignity and a high sense of aesthetics.

Before the advent of industrialization, when the cinema and later television had not yet made inroads into rural areas, the dances of the *muralis* provided entertainment to the masses. Despite heavy odds, these women are striving hard to keep their tradition alive.

Dances of the Kolhatnis: The *Kolhatnis* are nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. There are Hindu *Kolhatnis* and *Bhatu Kolhatnis*. Dancing girls are more to be found among the *Bhatu Kolhatnis*. Many of them are dancing in *tamasha* nowadays. The original *Kolhatni* dance was full of acrobatics and tight-rope walking.

To the *tāl* of the *dholki*, these dancing girls balance and walk on a rope stretched on bamboos on the roadside, but nowadays this is rarely seen. There was a tradition of erotic dancing amongst the *Kolhatnis* when they visited villages. *Gaokāmgārs* and *Gaopātis* (the revenue chiefs of the village) were honoured as the chief guests and connoisseurs. *Kolhatnis* traditionally sang *padas* full of *śringāra rasa* and even sat in the laps of the chieftains. This was the practice till the 1950s, after which, as social awareness grew, this kind of dancing was stopped by the *Kolhatnis*. They were accompanied by their men on *Dholki*, *Surpeti* and *Jhānj*.

After 1955, most of the nomadic tribes started getting settled wherever it was possible and that is why this type of dancing is not any more in practice. However, the influence of the dance remains in *tamāshā*. The use of the face, eyes, and the depiction of *śringāra bhāva* came into *tamasha* mainly due to these *Kolhatni* girls who presented their skill with tremendous stamina. Though they were conscious about the theatrical aspect of their dances, they were also fully aware of the cause for which they were dancing.

It may not be wrong to surmise that this performance has linkages with the *dombi kuttu* performed all over the South by hereditary folk families called the *domba kuttādis*. Their dances, in turn, have a direct link with the various *nrtyas* prevalent in the South as a parallel tradition to the classical one, though the line dividing the two is extremely thin.

There is another non-classical dance practice which is seen in Maharashtra, particularly in the border areas with Karnataka. *Yallama* of Soundatti (in Karnataka) is also worshipped in Maharashtra. A male devotee of *Yallama* is called *Jogta* and a female devotee *Jogtin*. They move about with the *jag* on their head. The *jag*—a bamboo basket—is a moving shrine of goddess *Yallama*. A *Jogtin* dances as she moves about the streets, accompanied by the *Tuntune* and *Conḍka*, a string instrument which also serves for percussion. The dance of the *jogtin* is circular in movement.

There are some *hastas* in this dance and the *jogta* accompanies these dancing girls. These girls are married to goddess Yallama as *muralis* are to Khandoba.

All over Maharashtra these non-classical dance practices are accepted by the society because some of them emerged from rituals like *jāgaran* and *jāg*. As long as there is faith in the folk deities these dances will be there in spite of reformation and social odds.

Kalāvantiṇs of the Peshwa Period: There was another class of dancing girls who were famous for their singing and dance-like gestures. History records that in the period of the Bajirao the second, Honaji Bala, the famous Shahir, was in love with Gunavati who was a *kalāvantiṇ*. Once in the *darbār* of the Peshwa, Honaji Bala was asked by Bajirao to use classical notations along with *lāvanī* singing. There is another opinion that while the *kalāvantiṇs* were presenting *lāvanīs* and dancing, Bajirao asked them to sit and present the song along with lighter footwork. That is how the *kalāvantiṇs* of the Peshwa period started presenting their dances in the court. Vankatnarsi was a well-known dancer of that period. There was also a *ganikā*, Ahili Kamathin, who was famous for her dancing.

In that period *tamāshā* was in practice but women did not take part as dancers. *Nāchya poryā* (a young male artiste in female guise) was included in the *tamāshā* troupe. Contemporary to these artistes, the *kalāvantiṇs* were dancing in the *kothīs*. Even today at Parabhani, Marathwada, there are *kothīs* where dancing girls perform before a limited audiences. From generation to generation, this tradition is kept alive even today. *Sangeet Bāri Tamāshā* is much influenced by this tradition.

There was yet another class of dancing girls known as *nātakśālās*. They were concubines, and not public women, patronized by princes and chiefs for their pleasure and entertainment. The *nātakśālās* could be home-born slave girls or girls purchased and brought up for singing and dancing who lived as mistresses of their lords. It is evident from documents that there existed a special managing staff to look after the *nātakśālās* of the royal seraglio. Promising young girls were picked up and trained in singing, dancing and other accomplishments. We find for instance, in a certain paper, the principal eunuch of the Peshwa's seraglio reporting to him about the progress of his budding *nātakśālās* or concubines, who were placed under the eunuch's charge. He reports that the music teachers gave them good practice in singing for three to four *ghatikās* every day, but the *natavas* (dance teachers) were no good; they pretended to give lessons to the girls in dancing for a while, slapped them while teaching, and if questioned gave rude answers.

It was fashionable among the princely and noble classes to patronize such *kalāvanta* or dancing girls at their courts. They used to take pride in keeping the best and most accomplished ones in their service and lavishing considerable money on them. They sent their agents to such distant places as Delhi, Agra, Lucknow, Mathura, Jaipur, Karnatak—the old centres of art and culture—in search of beautiful and accomplished dancing girls. The reports of the envoy of Nana Phadanvis of the Nagpur darbar about the manner and behaviour of the prince, if true, might serve to illustrate the fancy the ruling class had for dancing girls. Raghoji Bhosale, it is reported, once brought a *kalāvantin* from Benaras at the expense of some 20-25 thousand rupees but on finding her mediocre sent her back and despatched his agent to Lucknow with another 25000 rupees to look for another dancing girl.

It was customary for the wealthy classes to celebrate festivals and social occasions like weddings with *nāch* entertainment. At the wedding of Peshwa Savai Madhavrao, a number of dancing troupes were engaged to entertain the guests day and night with their dance and music. *Nāch* entertainment formed an essential part of the ceremonials generally observed on the occasion of State visits, receptions, and feasts.

These were only the formal occasions for *nāch* (*nādi*); informal occasions were numerous. The dancing girls used to follow military camps as concubines of some officers or just to practice their trade.

The *nāch* entertainment was presented in the form of a ballet. According to Broughton's account, a troupe consisted of one principal dancer, one or two female singers who assisted her, and a band of instrumentalists: one or two fiddlers, one Tabla-player, and a boy playing brazen cymbals who stood behind the dancer during the performance. The dress of the dancing girls generally consisted of a pair of trousers and a gown of some gaudy colour, often trimmed with plenty of tinsel lace. Describing the *nāch* proper, he says while dancing they would never spring off the ground but would slide along in a measured space, marking the time exactly by a stroke of foot and thereby ringing little brass balls fastened round the ankles. Their dances, says Forbes, required great attention because the small balls fastened round the dancers' feet sounded in concert with the music. Usually, two girls performed at the same time. He further adds that although their steps were not so complex and active, they were interesting enough, for the song, the music and the motions of the dancer combined to express love, jealousy, despair and the passions so well known to lovers.

Devadāsīs of Goa: In Goa there was a tradition of *devadāsīs* but there is no evidence that these *devadāsīs* performed skilful dances. There were

different categories among these women. The *bhāvins* used to stay in the house and take part in the household work of the *yajaman*. The *devalis* were women who looked after the temple lighting arrangements. They used to clean the lamps and prepare the cotton strings as part of their everyday work. The third category, *devadāsīs*, were connected with dancing. According to a folklorist of Goa, Malharrao Desai, the *devadāsīs* were more of singers than dancers. Very light steps accompanied their singing, which was in praise of gods and goddesses like Mangesh and Shantadurga.

Tamasha Dancing: Till the beginning of the 20th century there were hardly any dancing girls in *tamāshā*. Afterwards many renowned female *lāvāni* singers and dancers came into the limelight. In Balgandharva's time Kausalyabai Koparkar was a famous dancer. Gori Anusuya, so named because of her fair complexion, was also known as a dancer. The famous Pavala with Patthe Bapurao was a well-known dancer in the 1930s. Thereafter we see Pandharpurkar, Narayangaonkar, Kantabai Satarkar and Pushpabai Jejurikar who were famous for their *bhāv darshāni* and dancing.

At present there are many female dancers who practice this non-classical dance tradition of *tamāshā* in Maharashtra. Dr Kapila Vatsyayan has found similarities between *tamasha* dancing and Kathak. These lady dancers were taught *abhinaya*, *bhāva mudrās* and *chālis* by the *bhāradis* and *gondhalis* in the first quarter of the 20th century. *Lāvāni* dancing is today a part of *tamāshā*. The categories are as follows: *Khadi Lāvāni* (erotic *lāvāni*), *Baiṭhakichi Lāvāni* (for a limited chamber audience), and *Gauḍan*.

Khadi Lavani: This dance is presented by a female artiste who moves to a particular *tāla*. There are many actions included in this type of dancing. The *sṛngāra rasa* is the dominant feature of these presentations.

Baiṭhakichi Lāvāni: This is also called *adyāchi lavani*. It clearly shows the influence of Muslim culture. It is presented by a female artiste while sitting on the floor. It is also full of *sṛngāra rasa* and sometimes obscene words and compositions are sung. Even today it is in practice.

Gauḍan: The *gauḍan* refers to Gokul, the place where Lord Krishna spent his childhood. Krishna is very much acceptable to common people who believe in folk traditions and faiths. That is why when *tamāshā* was emerging as an independent art form the Krishna character was adopted by *tamāshā* artistes for their audience. To propitiate Lord Krishna in *tamāshā*, ladies as *gopis* used to sing songs which were called *gauḍans*, accompanied by dancing. This dance is presented by two or three female artistes, making it essentially a group dance. This dance practice has contributed to other theatrical dances.